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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Twenty-fourth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 636th MEETING

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva,
on Monday, 29 May 2000, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. OUEDRAOGO

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GE.00-42514 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (agenda item 4) (continued)

Initial report of Suriname (continued) (CRC/C/28/Add.11; HRI/CORE/1/Add.39/Rev.1; CRC/C/Q/SUR/1; written replies of the Government of Suriname to the questions raised in the list of issues (document without a symbol distributed in the meeting room in English only))

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Suriname resumed places at the Committee table.

2. The CHAIRPERSON invited the members of the delegation to reply to the questions put by the Committee members at the previous meeting.

3. Ms. PAWIRONADI-DASI (Suriname) said that the joint cooperation programme between the Government and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the field of human rights promotion for the period 1998 to 2002 included a number of activities in support of the survival, development, protection and participation of children and their families in Suriname. It was implemented jointly by five Government ministries and a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs). One component of the joint programme was the child rights promotion programme, which was designed to increase awareness of the rights and responsibilities of children and adults. Its activities had included a one-day media workshop, surveys among media personnel and the publication and dissemination of materials promoting the principles of the Convention. Presentations on the Convention had also been given to the mini-congresses, which brought together children between the ages of 12 and 18.

4. Mr. VERWEY (Suriname) replying to a question by Ms. Rilantono, said that girls had formerly been obliged to do housework more than boys, for social or cultural reasons. However, parents had recently begun to gain awareness of the importance of education, and girls were generally no longer obliged to do household tasks at the expense of their schooling. A Children's Home Bill had been drawn up, in response to the need to introduce some regulation into the field of child protection. The Bill addressed issues such as health, placement of children in alternative care, evaluation of placement, the right to education during placement and birth registration. It also set out the rights of parents when children were placed in institutions.

5. The Government had taken measures to attenuate the effects of the brain drain among medical professionals by increasing salaries and improving working conditions in the affected professions. However, those efforts had not been sufficient to stem the tide of departures, as many medical professionals found salaries and living conditions more favourable overseas. The activities of NGOs were coordinated through protocols of cooperation concluded between such organizations and the Government, which identified each NGO's area of activity. There were also forums in which NGOs and State agencies met periodically to discuss cooperation and to advise the Government on specific issues.

6. Mr. VREEDZAAM (Suriname) said that there were no plans as yet to set up a children's Parliament in Paramaribo. However, when the youth commission had first been established it had held a number of meetings in which children had been given the opportunity to express their views. Replying to Ms. Karp, he said it was not clear whether the Government would accede to the Convention against Torture. However, Suriname was a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, article 7 of which prohibited torture. It was also a party to the Inter-American Convention to Prevent and Punish Torture, and torture was banned in the Constitution.

7. Violation of a child's integrity was an offence under the Criminal Code, and any policeman or other person who committed such an act was prosecuted. When parents who were living separately could not agree on custody arrangements, the case was brought before a court, which sought to hear the views of all concerned, including children over 12. In the case of children under 12, the authorities generally explained the reason for their decision in terms comprehensible to the children, and often proposed solutions. Children could not be forced to leave their parents, unless it was ascertained that it would not be in their best interests to remain with them. A legal guardian represented the interests of a child unable to express his or her views.

8. Suriname's culture and tradition, like those of many Caribbean countries, were strongly influenced by its history of slavery. For years, it had been considered crude and improper for subordinates to look their superiors in the eyes when the latter addressed them, and that tradition had unfortunately been carried through to many, but not all, of the relationships between children or students and their elders or teachers.

9. When a Government ministry proposed the adoption of a bill, it submitted a draft to the Council of Ministers, which forwarded it to the Council of State, an advisory body for the executive branch. The bill was then sent to Parliament, which had a full agenda and might not be able to give it rapid consideration. The Government bypassed that problem by issuing State decrees which provided regulation pending parliamentary action.

10. An internal office of the police force received and investigated complaints of police brutality. Depending on the gravity of the offence, it suggested disciplinary measures or referred the case to the courts. In cases of separation or divorce involving custody disputes, the court granted or prohibited visitation according to its interpretation of the best interests of the child.

11. Ms. KARP asked what measures the Government took to ensure that teachers did not practice corporal punishment, and what action had been taken against those responsible for police brutality.

12. The CHAIRPERSON invited the Committee members to ask questions concerning family environment and alternative care, health, education and special protection measures.

13. Ms. TIGERSTEDT-TÄHTELA asked what the Government's criteria were for the transfer of State resources to local communities in order to support the provision of social services at the local level. Paragraph 119 of the report referred to a policy statement of the Ministry of Education covering the period from 1992 to 1994, according to which priority had

been given to improving the qualifications of teaching staff. While article 28 of the Convention addressed the more technical aspects of education, article 29 called upon States parties to ensure that education should be directed to the development of the child's personality. Had the Government reviewed its policy to place more emphasis on individual development?

14 Mr. FULCI, referring to the committee established to review legislation on sexual offences committed against children, asked what the status of that legislation was and whether a new law had been enacted by the National Assembly.

15 The Government-run Crisis Center for Sexually Abused Children, which had been very effective in 1993 and 1994, had apparently been closed. He wondered whether the Center would be reopened and whether strategies had been adopted to combat sexual violence committed against children. According to the State party's report severe malnutrition among children had led to the deaths of a number of children over the last 20 years. However, no figures had been given to indicate the current extent of that problem, and he wondered whether the Government had considered ways of addressing it. By 1980 the incidence of malaria had reached epidemic proportions, whereas it had been at an all-time low in the 1970s. Diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases were also responsible for high infant mortality levels; he inquired as to the current number of cases.

16 Turning to child labour, he asked what measures had been taken to identify and address child labour involving children under 15. Was Suriname considering ratifying the 1999 ILO Convention (No. 182) concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour?

17 Mr. RABAH noted that visitation rights were not covered by Surinamese legislation but were regulated by the courts in consultation with the Family Law Bureau. He wondered what the limits of both bodies were and whether they cooperated in the best interests of a child separated from his or her family. He would also like to know whether a bilateral agreement existed between Suriname and the Netherlands to regulate family reunification.

18 Ms. RILANTONO, noting that 17 per cent of babies born were born to teenage mothers, asked whether arranged marriages were still common. She also requested additional information on street children and action by the State party to address the problem.

19 Mr. DOEK, referring to the protection of children against parental abuse, asked to be updated on the supervisory measure mentioned in the report as not being applied because of legislation governing guardianship. He would appreciate information on bodies such as the "Volksraad", Bureau for Child Development, Foundation for Human Development and Domestic Abuse Network, on the resources allocated to them and on their effectiveness. He would also like to know how much money was allocated to education.

20 The report mentioned the existence of many mechanisms to encourage school attendance, such as the provision of school supplies and subsidies; what were the criteria for receiving benefits, or was assistance offered to all children? Considering the alarmingly high number of children who did not attend school, especially in the interior, the high drop-out rate and the lack of motivation among teachers, prompting strikes which had led to the closure of schools for

months at a time, there seemed to be a disproportionately large amount of resources allocated to the Ministry of Education. He would like to know what the Government was doing to improve the quality of education, school attendance and completion of, at least, primary school. Had it envisaged extending the years of compulsory education? Children could enter the labour market as early as 12 provided the work they performed was not physically dangerous, but were there labour inspectorates? He would also like to know whether the Government intended to ratify the 1977 ILO Convention (No. 148) concerning the Protection of Workers against Occupational Hazards in the Working Environment Due to Air Pollution, Noise and Vibration. He asked the outcome of the discussions on the juvenile justice system and whether any recommendations had been made.

21. Ms. MOKHUANE asked whether, in the light of the high malnutrition levels, child-stimulation programmes existed, and whether the Foundation for Human Development was involved in that effort at the family level. With regard to child-rearing practices, had the Foundation's research results been incorporated into the preventive programmes, and was the Foundation adequately staffed?

22. Ms. KARP said that, according to the written replies, suicide was the second most frequent cause of death among 5 to 14-year-olds, which was a low age range in that suicides were usually found among teenagers. However, no incidence of deaths as a result of suicide had been reported in 1995 and no data was available from 1996. Did that mean there had been no further suicides in that age group or had the issue been ignored? In addition, had any studies been conducted into the causes of child suicides?

23. It was surprising that tighter controls were not placed on the "kweekjes system" of informal or traditional adoption as the fate of the child remained unknown. She wondered whether measures were in place to protect children who were adopted under that system and whether intercountry adoptions took place. She asked whether the Government intended to ratify the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Intercountry Adoption.

24. It was regrettable that the Crisis Center for Sexually Abused Children had been closed with no information given as to the future of the children it had been treating. She also wondered whether the amended legislation concerning the juvenile justice system would shorten the length of time during which minors could be held in pre-trial detention. What criteria did judges use to decide whether a minor would be treated as a minor or an adult in criminal cases, bearing in mind the adverse effects a criminal case could have on a child's future?

25. Mr. DOEK asked for clarification on the foster care procedure outlined in paragraphs 71 to 79 of the report (CRC/C/28/Add.11), which seemed to be an elaborate system, as opposed to the "kweekjes system" of informal adoption.

26. Ms. MOKHUANE asked for an explanation of the age limit (41) placed on prospective foster parents. She would like information about the standard of living in Suriname in order to appreciate the value of the allowances granted under the General Family Allowance Regulation of 1973. Regarding preservation and respect of identity, she asked whether the practice of noting

in the margin of a child's birth certificate that the natural father had acknowledged paternity still existed and whether it was still needed. She would also appreciate an explanation of the requirement for parental consent for intending spouses up to the age of 30 years under civil law.

The meeting was suspended at 4.20 p.m. and resumed at 4.30 p.m.

27. Mr. VERWEY (Suriname) said that, in addition to official bureaux and institutions, certain NGOs and village chiefs were authorized to register births. Replying to the question on minority and indigenous languages, he said a study had already been conducted on that topic, the findings of which would be discussed at the National Education Congress to be held in December 2000.

28. No study had been carried out on corporal punishment in families, which was a very sensitive issue, but public awareness in that regard had grown and the frequency with which corporal punishment was used was decreasing. Replying to Ms. Tigerstedt-Tahtela's question on the criteria used for budget allocation, he explained that there was a centralized budgetary system for ministries which allocated financial resources for the regions. The amount assigned to the different levels of Government depended on the particular ministry's workload.

29. With regard to the formulation of an education policy, several studies had been conducted on various aspects of education and the conclusions drawn would also be discussed at the National Education Congress at the end of 2000. He agreed with Mr. Fulci that data was lacking on several issues, which was why the Child Indicators Monitoring System (CIMS) and the Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS) had been established. Replying to the questions raised about the closure of the Crisis Center for Sexually Abused Children, he said that responsibility for the children had been taken over by the Foundation for Children, which was continuing the work of the Center with support from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing.

30. He acknowledged the lack of data on suicides among children, which had been due to the brain drain of staff in the institutions concerned; data was expected to become available in the coming months. The "kweekjes" system of foster care formed part of the country's social and cultural fabric. A neighbour might agree to rear a child at the mother's request or, concerned for the child's welfare, might make the suggestion herself. In neither case were any formal legal arrangements concluded. He noted that the system was falling into disuse; nevertheless, he would transmit to the authorities the Committee's concern that legal measures should be taken to ensure the protection of such children.

31. Replying to a question by Ms. Mokhuane, he said that for some years the Surinamese economy had been badly affected by inflation and other problems. It was true that the Government's financial support to private social institutions had accordingly declined; however, it also provided those institutions with materials, food and personnel.

32. Ms. PAWIRONADI-DASI (Suriname), said that the Government, with UNICEF assistance, had recently produced a report on the juvenile justice system, containing conclusions and recommendations for legislative and policy reform. Recommendations for legislative reform included: introduction of settlement of cases without the presence of a judge; extension of alternatives to the imprisonment of young people; legal requirement for police officers, judges

and other actors involved in an investigation to have been admitted to the office of the clerk of the cantonal court, establishment of a children's department in the Ombudsperson's Office, introduction of control mechanisms for children in conflict with the law, opportunity for State-employed lawyers to be trained and sworn in as children's lawyers, increase of the penalty imposed on a person who provoked a child, raising of the age at which young people could be tried as adults and reduction of the custody and pre-trial detention periods in respect of children.

33. Recommendations for policy reform included: provision of sufficient resources for the prevention of juvenile delinquency, implementation of programmes and projects for children placed in the Juvenile Reformatory, a national mechanism to devise a national youth policy, with the express exclusion of politicians, appointment of more public prosecutors to deal with young persons, formulation of a policy specifically relating to the prosecution of young persons and training of police officers, public prosecutors, judges and clerks of the court in the treatment of children. The Surinamese Government, especially the Ministry of Justice, acknowledged the Committee's concerns and intended to give effect to its suggestions. The report was merely the beginning of a process of reforming of the juvenile justice system.

34. Mr. VREEDZAM (Suriname), referring to general principles, said that non-discrimination was enshrined in the Constitution of Suriname. Concerning the language of instruction of indigenous children, he said he disagreed with the idea that children in the interior should receive mother-tongue instruction until the age of 12. While some mother-tongue education was necessary for very young children (6-7 age group), failure to introduce Dutch prior to age 12 would be discriminatory, as it would place children in the interior at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their compatriots in the capital. The topic would be placed on the agenda of the National Education Congress scheduled for December 2000.

35. He could not explain the 17 per cent incidence of teenage pregnancies, but confirmed that the statistics were accurate, as they had been the findings of a methodological survey. Children were provided with special protection under the Constitution, even though, as human beings, they were already entitled to all the rights established in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. He was unaware of any family reunification agreement signed between Suriname and the Netherlands.

36. He cautioned against excessively broad use of the term "street children". The few children found vending in the streets of Suriname - as in other countries - or trying to earn a few cents by watching parked cars could not be equated with the hordes of children actually living on the streets in the capitals of Latin America, who descended on restaurant tables to devour customers' leftovers. It was true that such children did not always attend school, but they did not constitute a serious problem. When they were in conflict with the police they were taken into police custody and given a lecture.

37. The "Volksraad" was an informal people's council which helped settle unpleasant situations such as maintenance recovery. It was now less frequently used, and its tasks were instead performed by the Bureau for Family Matters. All children in need were entitled to book subsidies from the Government and were given the same school supplies as other children; needy children in the interior received the same subsidies as those in the towns. He had already given the historical reasons for the fact there were so many disadvantaged children not attending

school in the interior. Some regions were accessible only by aeroplane or boat, and there had been problems in ensuring that teachers reached the area. It was not Government policy to marginalize those children, whose situation was an unfortunate result of history which the authorities were doing their utmost to overcome. He agreed with Ms. Karp's remark that the sudden interruption of data on child suicides probably meant not that the phenomenon had ceased to exist, but that data had not been collected.

38. Adoption from outside Suriname was possible under private international law; the Government intervened only if legal problems arose. However, the Bureau for Family and Law Affairs was always informed of and took responsibility for such cases.

39. Regarding pre-trial detention, he said that judges, who were impartial, had the authority to decide on a course of action based on the child's best interests in each case. The age range of 30-40 for future adoptive parents had been inherited from the Dutch, the rationale being that a person under 30 would have little life experience and that a person over 40 would lack the physical stamina to cope with a small child. Malnutrition was a serious problem in most developing countries, which could affect children from birth onwards. Although the Surinamese Government had not yet solved its own malnutrition problem, it encouraged mothers to take their children to health centres for regular nutritional check-ups.

40. The country had suffered malaria and dengue fever epidemics in 1999. The authorities were doing everything in their power to eradicate those two scourges by educating the people in proper sanitary precautions and encouraging them to obtain the necessary medicines before visiting the interior; however, the people also needed to play their part. At the forthcoming National Education Congress, consideration would be given to raising the age of compulsory education from 12 to 14 in order to prevent children from joining the workforce at too young an age.

41. Mr. VERWEY (Suriname) said that a survey had been conducted on corporal punishment in schools, the results of which had led the Minister of Education to issue guidelines for teachers' behaviour when punishing children in the classroom. That issue would also be addressed at the forthcoming National Education Congress, which would be the starting point for developing Suriname's education policy, to be submitted for approval by the Council of Ministers and the National Assembly.

42. Turning to child labour, he said that the numbers of child street vendors were decreasing, as greater public awareness of the phenomenon had encouraged parents to take more responsibility for their care. Nevertheless, the Government, in collaboration with UNICEF, had conducted a survey aimed at obtaining a clear picture of the situation of children, especially those below the age of 14, involved in economic activities. A seminar would be held later in 2000 to advise the Government on the measures required for solving the problem.

43. Accurate data regarding sexually transmitted diseases was not currently available but would be transmitted to the Committee as soon as possible. In 1998, the Government had embarked on a programme that focused on the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, in particular by informing people about sexual health risks and providing free condoms.

44 Mr. FULCI, noting that Suriname was one of the countries chosen by UNICEF to benefit from the Caribbean Multi-Country Programme for 1998-2002, asked what improvements the programme had so far brought to the health, nutrition, education and welfare of the children of Suriname.

45 Ms. KARP said that the purpose of the dialogue between the Committee and the State party was not to repeat information that could be found in the report and the written replies, but to provide more details about the implementation of children's rights in the State party. The dialogue with the delegation of Suriname had to some extent achieved that aim, but she would appreciate more specific information. For example, in reply to her question about how cases of police brutality were dealt with in Suriname, the delegation had described the complaints procedure already described in the written information provided, whereas she would have liked to hear examples of how particular cases had been dealt with, what the outcomes had been and how the child in each case had felt about the redress provided by the authorities. In addition, had any teachers faced disciplinary measures following the use of corporal punishment?

46 Concerning the language of instruction, she understood and welcomed the fact that all children were taught in Dutch in order to ensure that everyone had equal opportunities in adult life. However, article 30 of the Convention enshrined the right of the child to enjoy his or her own culture and use his or her own language. She therefore welcomed the idea that children from linguistic minorities should be taught their own language in addition to Dutch and encouraged the Government of Suriname to implement such a policy.

47 She would like to know what percentage of the resources of NGOs dealing with victims of child abuse was provided by the Government. The process of developing into a healthy and well-adjusted adult was often difficult for children who had suffered abuse. It was therefore very important to invest sufficient resources in the treatment, rehabilitation and reintegration of such children, as successful treatment at an early stage in life might reduce the resources required to deal with more serious problems later on.

48 She would like to know whether the views of the child were taken into account when it was decided whether to place a child in foster care and to whom children could apply if they did not agree with a decision to place them in care. It was important for the Government to play a role in protecting the best interests of the child in such cases.

49 While she did not question the authority of judges to decide whether a child offender should be dealt with under the adult or juvenile justice system, she would nonetheless like to know whether any specific criteria for such decisions existed, in order to ensure that they were made in a consistent way and without discrimination.

50 Ms. MOKHUANE asked what problems were preventing the achievement of excellent results in the education system, as the student-teacher ratios mentioned in the written reply to question 15 were good. Noting that education was frequently disrupted by teachers' strikes, she asked whether the Government could take measures to ensure that some teachers continued to work during strike action, so as to protect children's right to education.

51. She asked what the doctor-patient, psychologist-patient and social worker-client ratios in Suriname were. In the light of the "brain drain" mentioned in the report, she would like to know how the Government intended to implement the many programmes that had been established and what time-frame had been set for implementation. She would also like to know the outcome of the survey on perinatal mortality mentioned in the written reply to question 12 and asked whether a time-frame had been established for the eradication or near-eradication of malaria. What were the Government's priorities for 2000 to 2005 in the areas of education and health, particularly the health of adolescents and children under five?

52. Noting that many leisure activities for children were school-based and that compulsory education ended at the age of 12, she asked what provision was made for leisure activities for children outside the school system. Children still needed to enjoy the right to play beyond age 12, as play helped both intellectual and physical development.

53. Mr. RABAH asked whether the Government planned to take any measures to combat the trafficking of drugs such as cocaine in Suriname and the laundering of profits made through trafficking, particularly as there was an increasing problem of drug abuse among young people.

54. Noting that the report mentioned a few cases of abduction of children to neighbouring countries where they were subjected to abuse or sexual exploitation, he requested more information on the extent of that problem. He also asked whether the State party intended to conclude bilateral agreements with its neighbours in order to combat the problem and whether it intended to ratify the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption of 1993.

55. The CHAIRPERSON invited Mr. Doek to present preliminary conclusions on the discussion with the delegation of Suriname.

56. Mr. DOEK said that many of the oral answers provided by the delegation had enabled the Committee to form a clearer picture of the situation of children in Suriname. He acknowledged the efforts being made by the Government to implement the Convention, particularly in the legislative sphere.

57. One of the Committee's main concerns was the shortage of both financial and human resources in many areas, partly as a result of the structural adjustment programme that had been introduced to address the problems of unemployment and poverty. The Government should therefore consider the possibility of increasing the percentage of the budget allocated to social services. It was also to be hoped that the State party would in future provide data that not only covered different spheres such as education, health and welfare, but was also disaggregated according to various factors such as gender and rural and urban areas. The shortage of human resources was caused by the so-called brain drain, which meant that it was difficult for the Government to employ appropriately skilled professionals. However, he believed that the Government was committed to implementing the Convention and improving the situation of children by a variety of measures, such as increasing access to education and primary health care. One important measure needed was the introduction of a juvenile justice system that was

in conformity with the Convention Attention should also be paid to the situation of particularly vulnerable children, such as disabled children, victims of sexual exploitation and those at risk from drugs He hoped that the Government would act on the recommendations and observations of the Committee and wished the children of Suriname all the best

58 Mr VREEDZAAM (Suriname), referring to a comment by Ms Karp, said that children in Suriname could be taught in a language other than Dutch Written replies to the Committee's last questions would be provided as soon as possible

59 The CHAIRPERSON thanked the delegation for its participation in the dialogue with the Committee She urged the State party to accelerate the process of approving the amendment to article 43 of the Convention and to disseminate both the initial report and the details of the discussion with the Committee among the public in Suriname She wished the children of Suriname all the best

The meeting rose at 6 10 p m